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ABSTRACT

This model was used to investigate cultural factors which influenced the development of a good relationship between neighbors from different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic housing project in a Northeastern city. Three hundred Chinese, black, white, and hispanic families were studied. The results of the study suggested that the cultural similarity between an ethnic group and its neighbors produced the type of boundaries between the ethnic groups. The study also suggested that residents direct their actions and social relationships toward preserving security in an environment of crime and uncertainty. One basis for judgements about safe and dangerous persons was their cultural similarity or difference. The cultural dimension of an ethnic identity (the similarity between ideas about behavior, explanations of the world, and the meanings of social acts), influenced patterns of social interaction, and shaped the structure of ethnic groups and boundaries. (Author/JP)

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CULTURAL DISTANCE AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES IN AN INNER-CITY NEIGHBORHOOD

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Why do some ethnic groups develop more harmonious relations with their neighbors of different ethnicity than other ethnic groups? This paper suggests that one explanation is the cultural similarity between an ethnic group and its neighbors. It is thus a critique of transactional anthropologists who, by focussing on behavior, on patterns of action and choice-making, neglect the role of culture in generating social structure. In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, Barth argues that the central concern of anthropologists should be the organization of ethnic groups and boundaries, not their cultural content. Cultural differences appear to have little relevance to the nature of ethnic boundaries in his analysis. Boundaries emerge as the result of strategic choices by actors seeking to maximize their interests, switching identities when it is advantageous to them. He ignores the possibility that people may act out of an emotional or moral attachment to a particular ethnic identity or from a sense of uneasiness or moral repugnance produced by a culturally very different ethnic identity. This model of ethnicity frees ethnic studies from the sterile catalogu ing of cultural traits, but has serious limitations in accounting for the nature of ethnic boundaries. In my research in a multi-ethnic housing project in a Northeastern city, I found that cultural factors had a direct impact on the nature and persistance of ethnic boundaries. Here, cultural differences between the co-resident groups are substantial. Those ethnic groups which are culturally very different develop sharper boundaries between themselves than groups with more similar

cultural patterns. By culture I mean the cognitive dimension of society: norms, values, symbols, and expectations of proper behavior. Structure refers to patterns of behavior: regular, repeated forms of social action. Ethnic boundaries are structural phenomena, described by the frequency and nature of social interactions and relationships which occur between ethnic groups.

Barth describes ethnic boundaries in two different senses. First, an ethnic boundary is the product of individual decisions concerning ethnic identities. It circumscribes those who feel, by virtue of shared overt signs and basic value orientations, that they have the same identity. Second, an ethnic boundary "canalizes social life" (1969:15), serving to organize behavior and social relationships according to whether other persons are fellow members of the same ethnic group or "strangers", those who belong to a different ethnic group. Barth is primarily interested in the fact that ethnic identities are not necessarily associated with the same cultural attributes when an ethnic group is dispersed across a variety of ecological settings, rather than the nature of interactions between ethnic groups occurring at the borders of the ethnic group's distribution. Even if many of the cultural differences between ethnic groups are irrelevant in distinguishing co-ethnics from strangers, however, these differences are important in the construction of the rules which organize inter-ethnic relations.

The nature of the boundaries between the white, black, and Chinese residents of this inner-city project are significantly influenced by the cultural differences between these groups, which I will refer to as their cultural distance. This low and

moderate income housing project, constructed 10 years ago in conjunction with a massive urban renewal of the neighborhood, contains 300 families, of which half are Chinese, one quarter black, one tenth white, and one sixteenth Hispanic. In accordance with management policy, all groups are evenly dispersed throughout the project. The population is quite stable. 60% have lived in the project for 10 years. 3/4 of the black and white families and half the Chinese families have resided in the project since it opened. Because of income ceilings, the population is economically homogeneous. Most residents work in unskilled service and manual occupations with a sprinkling of skilled clerical or semi-professional jobs such as nursing, teaching, or police work. 86% of Chinese men are employed by Chinese restaurants or shops, and almost 2/3 of Chinese women work as stitchers. Very few whites or blacks work in either of these areas. However, whites and blacks themselves work in highly scattered locations. Thus, no project residents encounter their neighbors of different ethnic groups in their work. Each ethnic group is closely tied to a nearby ethnic community which serves as their center for social, recreational, and religious activities as well as shopping, entertainment, and social services. Children of all three groups attend the same elementary school.

Thus, the three groups have similar socio-economic status. Each is linked to organizations and institutions outside the project which pull them in separate directions. However, the boundaries between these three groups within the project are quite different. Blacks and whites have far more friendships with one another than either group has with the Chinese residents.

A few groups, such as the tenant association, incorporate both black and white residents, yet none includes either of these groups and the Chinese. The differences are most conspicuous in those areas of life where people are free to choose their companions, as they have not been free to choose their neighbors. All public spaces in the project are almost exclusively occupied by either blacks and whites jointly or predominantly by Chinese residents. Teenage groups which "hang out" in various locations are either Chinese or black with a sprinkling of whites. Whites and blacks occasionally visit the same parks and settlement houses in the area. Although not often close friends, white and black neighbors are generally sociable, in most cases knowing the names and something about the families and identities of those in the other ethnic group who live near them. In contrast, almost no Chinese residents are close friends of their white or black neighbors, and few know the names or personal histories of their neighbors in these ethnic groups. Blacks and whites are similarly ignorant about the names and personal identities of their Chinese neighbors. Social networks within the project tend to follow ethnically circumscribed patterns, but far more social ties provide communication of information and friendship across the black/white line than the division between either group and the Chinese population.

How can we account for the difference in the nature of these ethnic boundaries? Clearly, language barriers are a contributing factor. Many of the adult Chinese residents were born in China and speak little or no English, although a small number have lived in the United States for thirty or forty

years and speak a fair amount of English. A few adults were born in the United States and speak excellent English, and almost all of the young people, in their teens and twenties are American-born and speak excellent English. However, these Chinese-Americans have almost as little contact with the whites and blacks as their parents do. They also frequent separate recreational facilities, go to separate youth clubs, and have separate friendship networks. Many even attended the same elementary school as the black and white children.

This paper argues that because of the cultural distance between the blacks and the whites is less than between either of these groups and the Chinese, the ethnic boundaries between these groups is less pronounced. Objectively, the culture of the black and white residents is more similar than either is to the Chinese. Moreover, residents themselves perceive cultural distance as an explanation for ethnic boundaries. One white woman, for example, moved into the project because she liked the idea of a multi-ethnic environment. Yet, her children who played happily with their black neighbors, found the Chinese children, in her words, "just too different". Another white woman, organizing a community meeting with her priest, invited white and black neighbors, but balked at the idea of including her Chinese neighbor, fearing that she simply would not "fit in." Many Chinese residents feel uneasy about non-Chinese, finding their behavior strange and unpredictable and tend to avoid them. Blacks and whites complain about Chinese families who they claim hang chickens and ducks from the ceilings and in their closets, implying that this is a bizarre and unattractive habit.

Some of the differences between the culture of the blacks and the whites and the Chinese are their norms of family organization, styles of social interaction, and modes of expressing sexuality and aggression. These cultural patterns in particular serve to generate misunderstanding and hostility. Almost all Chinese families are nuclear, often including co-resident relatives who are agnatic kin. Most commonly, the additional, non-nuclear kinsmen are the husband's mother or father, or his sister or brother. Less often, the household includes the wife's mother or father,and rarely, her siblings. Families recently arrived from Hong Kong live with appropriate relatives until more housing is available. Family units are bounded, and members have a distinct sense of who is and is not included within these boundaries.

Black and white families, in contrast, are essentially organized as a bilateral kindred, with far more flexible principles of recruitment to membership in the family. About half the families of both groups are nuclear. The other half are one-parent families, frequently incorporating three generations of mother, grandmother,and children. Males participate either as brothers or as boyfriends, assuming the role of husband temporarily or permanently. Friends are often important to the family, and the boundary between family and friends is far more flexible than that of the Chinese family. Someone who performs the role of a family member may be incorporated into the family temporarily or permanently,,a phenomenon observed in other studies of black families.(Stack 1974; Hainer). In so far as residence decisions are based on kin ties, uterine rather than agnatic ties are critical.

This divergence in kinship patterns frequently leads to

misunderstanding. Chinese families often say that they find black and white families hard to understand, that people are always coming and going, and that they don't know how they are related to one another. They also find the existence of a woman living without a husband, although she may be receiving significant help from a brother or boyfriend, a strange and unfortunate family pattern. Whites and blacks, in contrast, find large numbers of Chinese families living together puzzling, not perceiving the underlying patrilineal structure of the family units. They complain that too many Chinese people live in one apartment and assume that these groups are collections of unrelated people. Such impressions of Chinese family organization are widespread, in spite of the fact that only a few families contain more than one nuclear segment. Blacks and whites express no similar confusion and hostility concerning one another's family patterns.

Blacks and whites are also significantly different from the Chinese in their styles of social interaction and their ideas about appropriate behavior in different situations. Chinese people are expected to express little overt aggression, particularly outside the family. Although feelings of anger occur, their style of expression is withdrawal and gossip rather than direct confrontation, shouting, or violence. In contrast, confrontation is a more acceptable way of settling differences in both black and white communities. Many black and white teenagers are involved in the social world of the "street", as were many of the adults in their teenage years. Here, one seeks to defend one's rights and position with fighting, if necessary. Being tough, resourceful in a crisis, and able to protect oneself

are highly valued. A few Chinese youths are also active in Chinatown gangs and street fighting activities, but the great majority are not, nor were many of their parents involved in such activities in their youth.

These ethnic groups also have different norms concerning dress and causal relations between the sexes. Chinese women dress modestly, rarely wearing shorts or sleeveless blouses outside their homes. Although fashionable, the dress of even young women is not sensual. In contrast, many young black and white women adopt a more sensual style. They feel more comfortable engaging in sexual joking and banter than young Chinese women. Where black or white women might find a male comment such as "Hey, baby, how are you doing?" not particularly enticing, unlike Chinese women, they do not interpret it as hostile, nor are they necessarily frightened.

Chinese residents maintain close friendships with other Chinese families in the project who are kinsmen or friends, but they do not place great emphasis on constructing ties of friendship with neighbors. In contrast, neighborly sociability is very important to white and black residents, many of whom come from urban neighborhoods in which friendship networks are coterminous with neighborhood groupings. These people find the Chinese residents cold and aloof, interpreting their unwillingness to socialize with neighbors as indicative of hostility and arrogance. One white woman complained that she never liked blacks that much, but at least they say hello to you, unlike the Chinese, who just ignore you.

Thus, the culture of the Chinese is significantly different from that of the blacks and the whites in these as well as many other ways. The cultural distance affects patterns of interaction

by influencing who are considered safe and dangerous kinds of people. The need for accurate categories of this kind is accentuated in high-crime, inner-city neighborhoods, but it is an issue in any social situation in which people encounter strangers. People inevitably categorize strangers in order to draw inferences about their behavior and to decide how to treat them. Safe people are those who behave in expected ways. Their behavior seems more predictable and reasonable, and deviant acts are more manageable. Such individuals are potential partners in a social relationship. Dangerous people, on the other hand, tend to be those whose behavior is uncertain and unpredictable, and difficult to control. Urban residents concerned about their security tend to avoid such persons. The actions of culturally distant ethnic groups is perceived as less predictable and therefore more frightening than that of more familiar groups. This perception discourages interaction, thus reinforcing boundaries between culturally distinct groups.

The Chinese residents of the project perceive blacks and whites as separate social categories, but see both as dangerous groups to be avoided. Blacks and whites also tend to avoid Chinese residents, although with indifference as well as fear. Blacks and whites do not construct social categories of one another which advocate complete avoidance. Rather, they adopt the attitude of suspicion until the individual is known personally. Blacks and whites do not view one another as representatives of undifferentiated social categories, but as potential friends or enemies. Thus, cultural distance is an active agent in the construction of these social categories which themselves serve to canalize patterns of social interaction between ethnic groups.

This paper argues that recent writers on ethnicity, adopting transactional models, have moved too far in their neglect of cultural phenomena in accounting for the organization of ethnic boundaries. Cultural factors, such as perceived similarity and difference in patterns of behavior, affect which social categori are seen as predictable and safe, thus influencing decisions about social interaction across ethnic boundaries. Particularly in short-run situations, such as the immigration of a new ethnic group into an area or the sudden co-residence of a large number of disparate ethnic groups, cultural distance may well influence the ease with which groups can establish rules of interaction across ethnic lies and construct inter-ethnic social relationships.

Cohen cogently argues that those he labels "action-theorists" such as Barth and Boissevain, have one-sidedly focussed on the political aspects of behavior to the neglect of the role of symbols, by which he means culture, customs, concepts, and rituals which have the power to evoke emotions and attachments. (1974) This study suggests the relevance of Cohen's perspective in a very different context. Here, the cultural dimension of ethnicity, rather than a simple calculus of transactional costs and benefits, is necessary to explain the emergence and persistance of ethnic boundaries.

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